

Eternal Gardens and the Queer Uncanny in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s “In the Closed Room” (1902)



KATE THOMAS
BRYN MAWR COLLEGE

Abstract: This essay reads Frances Hodgson Burnett’s 1904 short story “In a Closed Room” as a queer ghost story of intergenerational female affiliation alongside analysis of the story’s original illustrations, by artist Jessie Wilcox Smith, who lived and worked in a multigenerational lesbian ménage. This reading contrasts the closed room with an open garden, comparing the portrait of a closeted existence versus a yearned-for but impossible space of sexual freedom to similar moments in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1850 *The Scarlet Letter* and Henry James’s 1898 “Covering End.” This essay proposes that the Edenic garden is commonly figured as an erotic paradise into which the closet opens out. In specifically fin-de-siècle lesbian representation, this paradise is almost always dwelt in by ghosts; the garden is eternally lush, but the price of entrance is death. The essay engages theories of queer temporality, the uncanny, and the queer child.

Keywords: Frances Hodgson Burnett, “In the Closed Room,” Jessie Wilcox Smith, Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Henry James, “Covering End,” lesbian, ghost, queer child, garden, uncanny, queer temporality

Nine years before Frances Hodgson Burnett published her now-famous novel about a secret, walled garden, she published a short story about an eternal garden without “boundary.”¹ This garden is called into being and becomes a dwelling-without-end for three spectral and queerly entwined figures: two young girls and one aunt. Disappearing into Edenic homosociality held great appeal for Burnett; later in life she wrote of “holding as my most fixed creed

Pacific Coast Philology, Vol. 50, No. 2, 2015
Copyright © 2015 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

that *not* to [be] married was Paradise”² and her last significant relationship was with a woman, Elizabeth Jordan. They called each other “Querida” (“Dearest”) or—resonantly—Q.

The story “In a Closed Room” describes what a reviewer in the *Spectator* called “a secret relation of affinity and sympathy”³ between two girls who are otherwise divided by class and by death. It was first published by McClure in his magazine in 1902, then appeared as a book in the UK in 1904, and in the United States in 1905. In its incarnation as a novella, it was illustrated by Jessie Wilcox Smith. Smith belonged to a trio of women known as the “Red Rose Girls” whose lives together echoed the same-sex garden idyll described in the story. Artists Violet Oakley and Elizabeth Shippen Green set up a home and studio together with Wilcox Smith first in urban Philadelphia and then in the city’s more rural outskirts. Before they moved to the house from which the group drew its name, the Red Rose Inn in Villanova, they pledged themselves to each other; “they made a vow, a solemn agreement to stay together for life.”⁴ They made this vow manifest through an extended botanical trope in which they figured themselves as flowers and gardens and capable of disappearing into the eternity of nature. When Wilcox Smith died, Violet’s new lover Edith Emerson dreamed that Wilcox Smith “rose from her bed, glided across the room, and opened the French doors to the garden. Crossing the threshold she turned, grinned mischievously at Edith, and disappeared into the night.”⁵ Wilcox Smith could therefore not have been a more appropriate illustrator for Hodgson Burnett’s story; for both artist and author, depicting girls metamorphosing into plant life or passing into afterlives was a way of expressing lesbian relation.

At the turn of the century, numerous writers and thinkers were promoting oases of nature as places of freedom for the homosexual subject: Edward Carpenter’s early articulation of gay rights was centered on back-to-nature communal living; Radclyffe Hall celebrated the primitive pull of the land; and E. M. Forster’s novel *Maurice* is structured by a fantasy of what he called the “greenwood” of old England: “Men of my sort could take to the greenwood,” he writes in his Terminal note to the novel.⁶ Deep plant life can provide sanctuary to the sexual outlaw because woods and fells and gardens are a way of escaping the crush and grind of the social. In her scrapbook, Oakley explained the move to the country in a similar way: “We have grown tired of working in the midst of trolley cars, drays and all the noise of heavy traffic, so we three are going out where the air is pure and quietness prevails.”⁷ It is not merely a desire for peace and quiet that leads the women to remove themselves from commercial bustle, but a desire to be “we three,” set apart from the world and its conventions. In “In a Closed Room,” the working-class protagonist Judith is likewise set apart or “Other.” She “was not like the children in the

other flats" (6), so much so that she is described in nonhuman terms; she is a "queer little fish" (17), a "frail, curious creature" (6). And her oddity is further marked by her horrified reactions to modernity and commerce: she lives a few feet from the elevated railroad and she loathes the "demon which swept past the windows every few minutes" (4). Judith links the train's demonism to its relentlessly progressive temporality: "I hate it," she says. "It comes so fast. It is always coming" (5). Her parents' lives are similarly ruled by mechanically reproductive time in the forms of the "whizzing" (7) of a sewing machine and the demands of the factory whistle. Judith, in complete contrast, is silent and solitary and dreamy.

Judith is so thoroughly disconnected from her industrious, industrial parents, that she appears to be a changeling child, and her mother muses on how she bears no likeness any of her blood relations. Judith's grandmother, however, perceives similarities between Judith and her almost-forgotten Aunt Hester. Aunt Hester had died not only before Judith was born, but before even Judith's mother was born. The grandmother recalls that, like Judith, Aunt Hester had a "lily-white complexion and long slender fingers that was so supple she could curl 'em back like they was double-jointed" (10). This description is doubly uncanny; the lily-white complexion is a diacritical mark of Judith's imminent ghostliness and the backwards-bending fingers make her sound like a wrongly-put-together doll. Indeed, when Wilcox Smith devotes an entire color plate to Judith reverse-bending her fingers, she pictures the girl facing a blank wall and alone, except for a doll who is facedown on the floor (fig. 1). Both dolls (exemplified by the automaton, Olympia) and "doubles" are signal elements in Sigmund Freud's exploration of the uncanny⁸ and *backwardness* (Judith has her back to the viewer, her fingers are bending backwards, only the doll's back is visible) has become a key term in queer theory.⁹ Judith's "supple" and "curling" fingers, suggestive of sexual precocity, are thus an example of what Mandy Merck calls the "lesbian hand."¹⁰

What makes this short story remarkable is that the queer uncanny it posits is pitched as more real and more enduring than heterosexuality. As if to make quite sure of her point, Hodgson Burnett portrays not just one, but two kinds of heterosexual partnerships: a patently bad marriage and a happy one. Judith is kept awake by the violence of an abusive husband in the next door flat, whereas her own parents are very content in their love-match. Judith, however, is abstracted from both forms of union, and this abstraction is framed in profoundly metaphysical terms. Hearing the neighboring wife sobbing, "She doesn't know," the child whispered eerily, "that it isn't real at all" (23). Whereas Judith's parents' fondness for each other is referred to as "earthly" (15), Judith is un-earthly and other-worldly, to the extent that she perceives the world of the



Fig. 1 | Jessie Wilcox Smith, from "In the Closed Room," 1904.

living as a fiction. Mary Zaboriskis has pointed out that many child characters read as queer because "they feel most like outsiders where they should most feel at home."¹¹ And indeed, Judith eschews the home her happy parents have made for her. Her conversations are with the dead Aunt she never met, and

she repeatedly talks of “falling awake” (20). This is the secret that Judith holds in her “strange little soul” (23)—that she’s not of this world and “did not belong to the life she had been born into” (24). She is, we might say, temporary.

Judith does not belong to the progressive ephemerality of industrial time, but instead finds herself amongst her kind when she visits a park in springtime. Invigorated by the lush, green plant life, the previously noncommunicative child communes with the animals she meets there and feels the pulse of eternal life in the springtime growth of the plants.¹² The enlivening power of nature is the theme that Hodgson Burnett would go on to develop most fully in *The Secret Garden*, when the sallow orphan Mary is enlivened by an English garden, her rustic friend Dickon, and together the children and garden cure the invalid boy Colin. One of Hodgson Burnett’s sons, Lionel, had died young from tuberculosis and biographer Gretchen Gerzina points out that the story of a boy who “rises from his sickbed to cure himself with the aid of belief and nature” was wish-fulfillment for a bereaved mother.¹³ In the park in “In a Closed Room,” Judith catches sight of an upper-class girl dressed in white, with dimples and copper curls and they form a wordless, perfect understanding of each other: “They gazed as if they had known each other for ages of years and were separated by nothing. Each of them was quite happy at being near the other, and there was not in the mind of either any question of their not being near each other again” (28–29).

Judith and the girl do indeed meet again. Judith’s parents are made caretakers of a large, grand house that has been suddenly vacated by a family gone to the mountains. They are informed that the “still” (43) house has one closed room, which they must not disturb. But Judith recognizes the copper-curved girl in a portrait on a wall and, drawn to the locked door of the closed room, she finds it opens at her touch. Inside she finds the girl, and they become playmates. Their first meeting in the park was wordless, now in this new stage of their friendship they can talk but the girl warns that they must never touch. Her touch is established as mystically life-giving, when she brings the withered flowers in the roof garden back to life by brushing her fingers along them. One day the play changes, and the girl directs Judith to arrange a scene of life interrupted in the room; the girls pose a book lying on a sofa, a letter left half-written with the pen still in the ink, and new roses are brought to fill a glass bowl as light and ephemeral as a “bubble” (110). The scene thus set, she touches Judith for the first time and the reader realizes the significance of the girl having said she’s been “sent” (106) by Aunt Hester: “She laid her little pointed fingers on her forehead and Judith fell asleep” (112). This sleep opens out to a lush, eternal world: the two girls “went out together onto the roof among the flowers, but a strange—a beautiful thing had happened. The garden did not end at the parapet and the streets and houses were not

below" (112). This garden, we learn, is the "real" world, where it is "right to be" (113) and everything is quivering with life. The girls are not only happy to be together, where "every movement was ecstasy" (105), but this magical greenwood, to use Forster's term, unites them with Aunt Hester: "They held each other's slim-pointed hands and stepped out upon the broad, fresh green pathway. There was no boundary or end to its beauty, and it was only another real thing that coming towards them from under the white, flowering trees was Aunt Hester" (114). It feels, in other words, *perfectly natural* to see and to know Aunt Hester. And it is this story's dedication to the *oddness of feeling natural* that leads me to argue it is participating in a turn-of-the-century queer literary moment in which the natural world is mystically engaged in order to justify the naturalness of a queer subjectivity.

The revelation at the end of "In a Closed Room," is that the rich girl is already dead, it is her ghost that is reclaiming the house and taking her playmate Judith with her into the afterlife. Their two mothers—one working class, one wealthy—meet and realize they are now both bereaved. Their girls, for whom a mother figure is nonessential, have left them behind. Hodgson Burnett privileges instead the figure of the Aunt, who has somehow determined the immortal destiny of the girls. The role of aunt is less mundane than that of mother, and its close-but-not-too-close familial position means it retains an erotics. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was one of the first scholars to note that the avuncular relation is commonly a queer one, and Yopie Prins has suggested that we augment Sedgwick's notion of the queer avunculate to account for the "queer tutelage" offered by aunts.¹⁴ In the case of "In a Closed Room," the ability of the tantular to retain and stand for marginalized sexuality is marked via Aunt Hester's first name: twenty years earlier Nathaniel Hawthorne had made "Hester" the name of the sexual outlaw, and thus Hodgson Burnett enfolds a scarlet letter into the otherwise white—ghostly and floral—world of her first secret garden.

Hodgson Burnett was well aware of Nathaniel Hawthorne's character Hester Prynne; in her 1880 story called "Louisiana," a young girl's ignorance is demonstrated by the fact that she hasn't read *The Scarlet Letter*. And Hawthorne's and Burnett's stories definitely 'touch' via the intertwining of ghostliness and revivifying nature. Just as Judith's mother wonders if her child is of this world, so too "Hester could not help questioning at such moments whether Pearl was a human child. She seemed rather an airy sprite."¹⁵ When Hester and her lover meet again, it is in the "obscure" (197) woodland on the very outskirts of town and their meeting "was like the first encounter in the world beyond the grave of two spirits" (193). Hester's hope is that the three of them—her lover and their child, Pearl—can set up a home together, away from all society, in this verdant place. As she imagines this future, she unpins her scarlet letter and when

she casts the “stigma” from her, it lands among “withered leaves” (158), which mystically revive: the forest is suddenly flooded with light, “gladdening each green leaf” (158). This scene powerfully recasts the idea of the Fall: Hester’s sexual fall doesn’t cast her out of Eden, but rather into it and it is the felling of the sign of moral castigation that produces resurrection and lush new growth. Sexual policing of law and religion is made inconsequential by a “sympathy” between the outlaw and the natural world and Hawthorne is expository on the matter: “Such was the sympathy of Nature—that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth—with the bliss of these two spirits!” (204). Hawthorne’s godless, blissful forest may seem to be a far cry from Hodgson Burnett’s cultivated gardens, but as Lisa Moore points out in *Sister Arts: The Erotics of Lesbian Landscapes*, both art and artlessness play a part in the history of “the erotic garden” (16).

The Red Rose Girls used both their gardens and the grafting together of their names to make manifest the same-sex bonds between them. Their Villanova home was called the Red Rose because it was an old country estate that had substantial formal gardens and trellises covered in cascading roses. A 1901 photograph of the artists in their Philadelphia studio shows Green, Oakley, and Wilcox Smith seated, each holding an outsized rose, while Cozens tilts a watering can over their heads, pretending to water the women (fig. 2). The handwritten identification on verso reiterates the conflation of roses with women, as it reads “The red roses; Elizabeth Shippen Green, Violet Oakley, Jessie Willcox Smith, Henrietta Cozens; with Violet Oakley poster [in background] for first exhibition at the Plastic Club; taken at 1523 Chestnut Street, when they planned to move to “The Red Rose”, Villanova.” As we have seen, “In a Closed Room” similarly metamorphoses girls into flowers, and it also posits the fleshiness of flowers. The ghost child leaves trails of decaying flowers behind her, flowers that have the heft and feel of flesh: “wax-white hyacinths and large heavy rosebuds” feel, says Judith’s mother, “like cold flesh when I first touched it.”

The “reverse turn” of not only transforming women into plant life, but of gyno-anthropomorphizing that plant life produces a deep way of belonging, of having a place in the world—a self-possession that is otherwise hard for the queer female subject to access. It even produces, I have argued elsewhere, a lesbian immortality that trumps the dispossessions of the here-and-now.¹⁶ The Red Rose Girls rooted their queer domestic and artistic spaces by entwining their names with the natural world. This was a practice they maintained even after they had to leave the Red Rose Inn when they lost the lease in 1906. In that year, they moved to a new home in Mount Airy, taking with them the young woman who had befriended Green and worked as housekeeper in Villanova; Henrietta Cozens. The four women named their new home



Fig. 2 | (Caption written on reverse by Violet Oakley) “The Red Roses: Elizabeth Shippen Green, Violet Oakley, Jessie Wilcox Smith and Henrietta Cozens. Poster for first exhibition at the Plastic Club taken at 1523 Chestnut Street when they planned to move to ‘The Red Rose’ Villanova.” Archives of American Art.

“Cogslea,” a name which bonded together their surnames, “Cogs” being an acronym of the initials of their last names. “Lea” means a meadow or field and was chosen “to describe the slope on which the estate was located.”¹⁷ In 1906 journalist Jessie Trimble lauded the remarkable success and influence of the original artistic trio by celebrating most specifically their pastoral togetherness: “Their triple career, united because of its success and because they live together on a beautiful estate, known as ‘Rose Inn,’ near Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, is so delightful in its results as to be almost romantic.”¹⁸

Trimble puts her finger on it: *romantic* is the right word. When the women were plotting their removal from the Chestnut Street studio to Villanova, they kept these plans secret, even devising a code; they referred to the Red Rose Inn as “Covering End.” This was a reference to a Henry James story of the same name, and given that James’ story is itself heavily queerly coded, the women’s choice of “key” for their code has the feel of ever-receding homoerotic allusion.¹⁹ A tale of shiftingly triangulated affiliations and arranged marriages, which surround a financially embarrassed heir who is implied to be both homosexual and available for heterosexual trafficking, the only love in the story is for the titular house and the plot centers on who will, *in the end*, inherit “Covering End.”²⁰ The Red Rose Girls’ extra-diegetic engagement of the story decided the matter; they referred to themselves as “The

Lawful Heirs.” Their slash fiction engagement with James’ tale is a way of rescuing queer relations from out of patriarchal property relations. The young woman in the story is being traded into marriage by her father as part of a sordid financial deal, but he assures the would-be bridegroom that “She’s as unconscious as the rose on its stem!” The supremely conscious Red Rose Girls played with this James story because it is a tale of queer estates being wrested out of the grip of heterosexual property relations, and the house itself seems stolidly impervious to any attempt to mortgage or trade its “old ghosts.” The story opens by leading the reader through the architecture of an “old English country-house” that had come down through the ages “without losing its way.” No one can interrupt “so perfect an image of immemorial domesticity.” The characters who crawl all over the house in the story are not at all immemorial—they are instead ephemeral and interruptive, but if we exit the story via the Red Rose Girls’ claim to inheritance, we can find the pastoral calm that the house is due.

The closet is, of course, the most signal of formations for queer subjectivity, and the root of the word “closet” means “closed room.” “The relations of the closet,” Eve Sedgwick writes, are “the relations of the known and unknown” (3).²¹ When covered ends and closed rooms open up into landscapes without topographical or temporal limit, it is because turn-of-the-century lesbian relations found expression through an “unknown” that trumped the banalities of the heterosexual world; allying herself with the undead and the uncanny the lesbian put herself beyond reach.

NOTES

1. Frances Hodgson Burnett, *In a Closed Room* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1904), 114. *The Secret Garden*, first published serially in 1910, was not well known during Hodgson Burnett’s lifetime; that its success was posthumous is fitting to the tropes of resurrection that are shared by both “garden” stories.
2. In a letter to her son, Vivian, 25 Oct. 1901. See Gretchen Gerzina, *Francis Hodgson Burnett: The Unexpected Life of the Author of The Secret Garden* (London: Chatto & Windus: 2004), 48.
3. 17 Dec. 1904, 21. The review also warns that this story is not suitable for children because of its theme of “inherited doom.”
4. Alice A. Carter, *The Red Rose Girls: An Uncommon Story of Art and Love* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2000), 70.
5. *Ibid.*, 193.
6. E. M. Forster, *Maurice* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 212.
7. Oakley Scrapbook, AAA. Quoted in Charlotte Herzog, “A Rose by Any Other Name: Violet Oakley, Jessie Willcox Smith, and Elizabeth Shippen Green.” *Woman’s Art Journal* 14.2 (Autumn, 1993-Winter, 1994): note 13.

8. A key principle of the “uncanny” as explicated by Freud in his 1919 foundational essay, is that of the familiar made askew. Hodgson Burnett grasped the principle quite smartly herself. Describing “In a Closed Room” to her son, she wrote: “The thrill of things occult can be best felt, it seems to me, when they occur in the midst of quite simply mundane affairs, and occur quite simply as part of them. Then they become real” (Gerzina, *Francis Hodgson Burnett*, 234).
9. Heather Love traces the queer associations of a backwards orientation in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007).
10. Mandy Merck, *In Your Face: Nine Sexual Studies* (New York: New York UP, 2000), 127.
11. Mary Zaborskis, “Queer Magic,” Public Books, 15 Apr. 2014. Web. October 21, 2015.
12. Hodgson Burnett was herself an animal lover, and—as in this story—associated this love with reincarnation: “in my various incarnations I believe I have been all sorts of animals. . . . I am sure I have been a beast again and again” (Gerzina, *Francis Hodgson Burnett*, 119).
13. Hodgson Burnett was attracted by the spiritualist and related thought so popular in this era. In 1884 she had become interested in Mary Eddy Baker and Christian Science and for a time was treated by the same metaphysical healer—Mrs. Newman of the “Boston Mind Treatment”—who was a neighbor of Eddy’s and who also treated Louisa May Alcott (Gerzina, *Francis Hodgson Burnett*, 96).
14. Yopie Prins, “Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinsters,” in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999), 47. A classic example of the queer tantular would, of course, be Oscar Wilde’s aunt Augusta/Lady Bracknell, and Hodgson Burnett and Wilde found each other quite enchanting. When Wilde visited her, “they spent the entire afternoon huddled in a corner, chatting animatedly, leaving her other guests to fend for themselves” (Gerzina, *Francis Hodgson Burnett*, 96).
15. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 118.
16. Kate Thomas, “‘What Time We Kiss’: Michael Field’s Queer Temporalities.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13.2–3 (2007): 327–51.
17. Charlotte Herzog, “A Rose by Any Other Name: Violet Oakley, Jessie Wilcox Smith, and Elizabeth Shippen Green,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 14. 2 (Autumn 1993–Winter, 1994): 11–16, 12.
18. Jessie Trimble, “Studying and Succeeding in Art,” *New Idea Woman’s Magazine*, Oct. 1906, 14.
19. “Covering End,” published in *The Two Magics* (1898), was originally written as a one-act play called *Summersoft*, which James wrote for Ellen Terry but was never performed. He first converted it into a short story, and then turned it back into a three-act play, this time titled *The High Bid*, which had a brief run in London in 1907.

20. Lest there be any doubt that James' tale was contemporaneously understood as queerly coded, in 1912 Louis Umfreville Wilkinson, a friend of Oscar Wilde, published a parody entitled "The Better End," purportedly taken from an unpublished novel *What Percy Knew by a "H*nr*J*m*s."* To demonstrate the queer punning of the "better end," critic Eric Haralson points to a scene where an "elderly" James figure bends before a hearth, trousers down, while a younger man at the "rearward" "advance[s] to [the] target . . . bristl[ing], stiffly enough . . . to satisfy . . . their common intent" (Eric Haralson, *Henry James and Queer Modernity* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003], 19).
21. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990).